

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 143 001

CS 203 540

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TITLE Middle School Writing: A Model Expository Paragraph Program--A Teaching Strategy.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (66th, Chicago, Illinois, November 25-27, 1976)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition Skills (Literary); Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; *Expository Writing; Middle Schools; *Paragraph Composition; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Exercises; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper explains the teaching strategy inherent in the model expository-paragraph program, a plan for middle-school, student writing based on imitation of and reaction to a model paragraph written by the teacher. The model paragraph provides material for the teaching of spelling, grammar, and composition skills and is a springboard for creative writing through personal responses. In its first presentation, the paragraph contains no sentence indicators. The students are directed to do a number of things to the teacher's paragraph, from adding capitals to total revision. The repetitive dividing of the word-string into minimal thought units reinforces the sentence concept while presenting grammar and punctuation in writing as comprehensive skills rather than as fragmented exercises. Following some motivational discussion of ideas about the theme of the teacher's paragraph, the students are directed to write their own paragraphs on a topic related to the teacher's. The paper concludes that this program offers procedure that can be built upon, since it is basic and complementary, yet flexible. The program also offers a format for serious expression, and, because it provides for a wide range of abilities, it assures individual student success. (RL)

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MIDDLE SCHOOL WRITING:
A MODEL EXPOSITORY PARAGRAPH PROGRAM -
A TEACHING STRATEGY

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MIDDLE SCHOOL WRITING

If middle school writing is different from other writing, it is because the student is different.

These are the in-between years, the years immediately prior to and including puberty. They are years of fantastic physical, mental, and emotional change. Transescence* is both a useful term and descriptive of this time period.

Characterization of the transescent is not flattering. He is confusing and contradictory. The length of his attention to external activities is short, for his focus is within. Sometimes he is hostile, and sometimes he is passive. Frequently he is excited and involved, and just as frequently he is pensive and withdrawn. He is critical, insensitive, boastful, thoughtless, and unsure of himself. He wants to be treated as an adult and forgiven as a child, while he trades his family for his peers.

Most of all, he is aware that he is changing and much of his time is spent thinking about his own emergence and who the new person will be.

As Gwendolyn Brooks wrote in Bronzeville Boys and Girls,

"Marie Lucille" says:

That clock is ticking
Me away!
The me that only
Yesterday
Ate peanuts, jam and
Licorice

Is gone already.
And this is
'cause nothing's putting
Back, each day,
The me that clock is
Ticking away.

*Donald Eichorn's term

WHAT THE TRANSCESCENT NEEDS

Obviously the middle school student has many needs. One very important need which can be provided for in the classroom is security.

The transescent needs to know what is expected of him, what he is expected to do, when and why he is expected to do it, and how it fits in a scheme of things. If not the planning, at least the plans must be shared with him.

In addition, security comes with routine organization and patterning. Within these parameters, it is possible to develop a program that is highly structured in process and procedure, yet creative and flexible in content.

A composition program, then, should have the following characteristics:

- (1) It should be a structured, systematic approach to writing.
- (2) The program should provide for at least a weekly writing experience.
- (3) It should provide something everyone can do (individual needs).
- (4) It should provide for correction and rewriting.
- (5) It should show tangible results that foster a feeling of accomplishment.
- (6) It should be appropriate for children's needs and interests.
- (7) It should be practical by work standards of both student and teacher.
- (8) The teacher should not be apart from, but actively involved in the process.

MOTIVATION

By the time he reaches the middle school, even the un-gifted child has encountered enough living experiences to have built up a wealth of ideas and opinions. He must be given an opportunity to express them in an interactive process.

The concept is terribly simple: Students have something to say, and will say it if given a reasonable opportunity. Technical skills may be lacking. Indeed, at this stage of development, the depth and quality of thought processes may be less than adequate. However, the students have already thoughtfully appraised human circumstances, and their views are ready for sharing.

Motivation for expression is not dependent upon the teacher. The need to communicate is intrinsic. The teacher's role is to provide stimulation, facilitate expression, and to encourage students to use a variety of modes. Clarification and evaluation of ideas is easier when one is reacting to views someone else has committed to paper. The range of responses is limited only by the teacher's willingness to share himself or to listen to his students.

I spoke before I had something to say,
(Un)fortunately, I can't write that way.

BASIC COMPOSITION: A MODEL EXPOSITORY PARAGRAPH PROGRAM

A planned program for student composition is a difficult thing to execute. The complexities of the modern school frequently interfere with systematic teaching and often make work in the second basic nearly impossible. A model expository paragraph program can help.

I hate to shout it seems that everytime I
raise my voice I can't hear myself I don't
think others can hear me either probably
what they hear is my loudness and not my
ideas the truth doesn't depend on volume.

(Paragraph form, Sentence form)

AN OVERVIEW

The model expository paragraph program is a teacher-led plan for student writing, based on imitation of and reaction to a model paragraph written by the teacher. It is an old idea, employing a concept frequently used in other disciplines and only sometimes in language arts: Here is how to do it; now, you do it. It is a humanistic approach to writing which respects student opinions and allows for individual differences.

Simply, the teacher writes an expository paragraph on some mutually interesting topic and reproduces it for the students.

For example, the teacher might write:

givers also have problems sometimes givers
do not know how to receive they find it
difficult to accept thank-yous and compliments
embarrass them some shrug off any
display of gratitude or affection they
haven't learned how to allow others to be
grateful

(Paragraph form, Sentence form, Compounding)

This string of words, this lump of clay, is the raw material of the program. The two parts of the program, the mechanical and creative activities, are based on it.

First, the students are directed to separate the words into sentences (minimal thought units), supplying indentation, capital letters, and end punctuation as an initial level activity. In addition, they can be directed to correct misspellings, to underline sentence parts, to join units together, rewrite specific sentences, and so on.

Secondly, following some motivational discussion of ideas related to the theme of the teacher's paragraph, the students are directed to write their own paragraphs on a topic related to the teacher's.

The expository paragraph is used for this procedure because it is complete, an expanded, three-part thought unit. One idea containing key words, which function as directional controls, is developed and concluded. Its patterned structure contains a format for the study of internal elements such as unity and coherency. Furthermore, because it is a three-part unit with an introduction, body, and conclusion, it provides a model for extended writing activities.

I know that into everyone's life a little
rain must fall however it seems I am get-
ting more than my share of cloudy days
people have told me that if I lead a good
life the sun will shine on me but I am
still waiting for some fair weather in
fact pretty soon I will have to buy an
umbrella

(Paragraph form, Sentence form, Compounding,
Nonessential elements)

HOW IT WORKS

A writing program should provide frequent writing opportunities. Writing improves through practice, yet the overburdened language arts

teacher can read and correct only so many papers. This is a survivor's program: a great deal is accomplished without a great deal of work.

Make Thursday writing day. To begin with, the teacher either dictates the model paragraph, writes it on the board for students to copy, or duplicates it. The paragraph contains no sentence indicators and, at this stage, looks like this:

today everybody wants to be cool cool
isn't loud brash or flashy cool never
acts the fool cool never says anything
hot and never causes anyone else to
heat up everyone agrees that it is
easier to point out cool than to explain
it or be it

(Paragraph form, Sentence form, Compounding,
Items in a series)

The Mechanical Part

As noted in the overview, the students can be directed to do a number of things to the teacher's paragraph, ranging from adding capitals to total revision, depending on the students' progress and abilities. The repetitive dividing of the word string into minimal thought units reinforces the sentence concept. The student uses aural, visual, and tactile senses to develop an understanding of the sentence as a concept.

Clearly, grammar and punctuation are where they should be--in the context of composition. Writing becomes a comprehensive skill as opposed to fragmented exercises.

At the beginning of the program, the teacher should read his paragraph aloud in such a way that thought units are readily apparent. Following the reading, the students should have adequate time to do the directed work individually rather than in class-correction fashion. This also gives the teacher time to help students experiencing difficulties.

The emphasis is always on the students trying what they are asked to do without fear of failure. The teacher should remind the students not to worry if they cannot do the work easily, for it is something they will learn to do.

This work should be corrected immediately, but not graded. It is, after all, a learning activity, and the teacher should be concerned only that every child tries the assignment. Specific lessons preceding or following the work with the paragraph are useful as reinforcement.

The Creative Writing Part

our parents tell us to be our own persons to think for ourselves and not to follow the crowd they have forgotten that there is safety in numbers other people can't stand anyone who is different if we don't stand out they will leave us alone it is better to blend

(Paragraph form, Sentence form, Items in a series, Independent Adverbial Clause)

A rereading of the paragraph recalls the theme and, at the teacher's discretion, provides for a variety of motivational activities. Frequently, the students will just sit and smile because they already have something to say and are eager to write. The suggested topic sentence starters provide the direction and additional stimulation. For example:

1. One time I tried to be different.
2. I would rather be like ...
3. He/she thinks he/she is better than ...
4. Your own related to topic

The use of teacher suggested topic sentences is an integral part of the writing program. They provide the parameters for response. The topic sentences themselves are patterned and ordered, providing for the range of student abilities.

The first topic sentence above is the opening sentence for a

student's paragraph. He does not have to worry about where to start. His first sentence is written for him. Moreover, it is a specific opening sentence with key words which control the development of the paragraph.

The second sentence is open-ended and offers the chance to be more personal and creative than the first.

The third sentence is the outlet topic sentence starter. It allows the student to remove himself from the paragraph and write about someone else.

The fourth sentence is student created. It offers freedom, requiring only that the student check with the teacher to assure that his topic sentence contains control words.

Certainly the response environment is controlled even with the number of choices. The important thing to remember is that the student is reacting to something real from his own knowledge bank and at his own level.

Allow twenty to twenty-five minutes of class time for students to write their paragraphs and use this time for individual help. Not only does this time assure production, but it also allows the teacher to work with those students who will not ask for aid. Remind the class that you will be looking closely at their developing and concluding sentences. In the early days of the program, you may receive papers that look like the following uncorrected paragraphs:

One time I tried to be different. And
be like someone else. It not to much fun
either. I didn't do want the real me would
do, instead I did want someone else did,
and got in trouble. I won't be like no one
else again.

She think she is better than anyone else. She think she can have anything she want at anytime. Everyone have to notice her. She always wants everyone to follow her.

I would rather be like everyone else, because if you were different no-one would like you. If you were super smart, or a very very polite person everyone else would think your strange. If you thought you were super cool everyone else would think your a jerk. If you thought you were a super-star, and could beat all your friends, you would not have any friends. Thats why I would like to be like everyone else.

Following the first writing, instruct the students to proofread their papers. This should be a guided activity with the teacher suggesting specific things to look for. Many of the errors in the student papers above could have been corrected with such guidance. Hopefully, this early proofreading work will develop into a writers' workshop in the weeks ahead as the students become more confident in their work.

Have the students rewrite their paragraphs for homework, pointing out that this allows for a "cooling" period, so they can look at their work more objectively.

On Friday you will have a batch of papers to read and correct. Correct everything and correct the papers quickly. Avoid vague comments which require students to do things of which they are incapable. Quick correction will allow you to note class weaknesses to be remedied in the next session. Individual prescriptions can also be easily planned at this stage.

generally it is better to think with your head rather than your heart however it is better to look at your friends with your heart rather than your mind friendship relies on love not logic many of our actions cannot stand the glare of reason human understanding requires the soft glow of affection

(Paragraph form, Sentence form, Nonessential elements)

The following Monday, the teacher should discuss general problem areas, return the corrected papers, and assign a final rewriting for home-work. Remind the students that these final copies should be in ink and as neat as possible. No further corrections are made. A quick glance is sufficient assurance of the rewriting. Extreme problems can be noted, but it must be remembered that this is a developmental process. Practice will take care of many problems.

Urge the students to show their writings to their parents. Also, sharing a number of paragraphs with the class provides for an exchange of ideas as well as motivation for improved writing.

The effect on the students is exciting. Not only have they had an opportunity to express their views on a variety of topics, but they gain a feeling of real accomplishment as the paragraphs mount up. The proud authors will frequently reread their paragraphs and share them with others. Fifteen or more well-written paragraphs a semester is a meritorious accomplishment. For this reason and because it is student oriented, a clinical rather than comparative grade is suggested.

Absences and interruptions are no problem since the paragraphs are numbered, and students can make up the creative paragraph part of the class work with relative independence.

he was doing his writing assignment in class when the teacher called on him after he said he wasn't paying attention he knew he had said the wrong thing neither was pleased with his answer he started to gather up his books to leave when the teacher smiled and repeated the question

(Paragraph form, Sentence form, two Complex Sentences)

TOPICS AND THEMES

What does the teacher write about? Everything. The only qualification is that the paragraphs be mutually appealing. This means they should be relevant and intellectually appropriate to the students involved, or they will not work. Remember, however, attention must be given to the form. After all, they are teaching models.

The following are topic or opening sentences of paragraphs which have been used with students. They are offered here only to suggest writing ideas.

Write about relationships:

That girl doesn't know how to treat her friends.

Communication breaks down when one party stops listening.

Sheep are curious animals . . . sometimes people act like sheep.

Immature people think they can say whatever they want with impunity.

I suppose I can hate someone because my father does.

Maybe your behavior is my fault.

People are gregarious animals.

Or feelings:

Although the music stopped, they continued to dance.

I used to think that the slogan "make love, not war" was communist propaganda.

If you think bigotry has disappeared, you have been dreaming.

The boy received a letter from the president.

If I smile and you stick out your tongue ...

Often people oppose change of any kind.

Or be introspective:

Being your "own man" means that you stand by yourself with your own values and your own opinions.

She learned that looking is not enough. One must also find...

I am glad I am not like other people.

Who knows why men go crazy?

You can close the door, put up a fence, or lock me in a cage ...

If everything I ask for comes to me ...

Or be topical:

Almost everyone was waiting for the return of spring.

June used to signal the end ...

Big city murders capture a lot of headline space.

In Michigan we usually have an Indian summer in late October.

A good coach develops more than just physical talent.

Election day is always exciting.

Daily, the mass media takes a firmer grip on our lives.

Or on anything else:

Belle Isle is Detroit's own "other world."

A euphemism is an inoffensive term substituted ...

The only sure response to a rapidly changing society is education for flexibility.

His cousin said you could hear corn growing if you listened hard enough.

Humans tend to extend ownership to familiar objects.

Concentration can be aided

They had to learn to live within their means.

Of course, there is more to composition than the writing of an expository paragraph. Certainly the expository paragraph itself has many variations of format. What a model expository paragraph program offers is a process and procedure foundation plan that can be built upon. The fact that it is basic and complementary, yet highly flexible, is its strength. Most importantly, it offers a format for serious expression, and, because it provides for their wide range of abilities, it assures individual student success.

A NOTE ON MECHANICS

The model paragraph is an especially useful vehicle for teaching the following writing skills. Repeated practice throughout the program assures their mastery.

The student should be taught:

1. What a sentence (minimal unit of thought) looks like (always begins with a capital and ends with a question mark, period, or exclamation point).
2. What a paragraph (expanded thought unit) looks like (indentation, topic sentence, developers, etc.)
3. The use of the comma (when in doubt, leave it out).
 - a. with two successive modifiers
 - b. with interrupting and nonessential elements (words, phrases, clauses)
 - c. with items in a series -- (, , and)
 - d. with introductory adverb clauses (When a sentence begins with words such as when, if, since, unless, and so on, you will probably need a comma to set off the first idea. The opposite is also true.)
 - e. in a compound sentence
 1. There are only two ways to join two separate intact sentences together: a semi-colon or a comma plus any one of seven conjunctions -- and, or, nor, for, but, (yet; so) i.e., ; = , plus conjunction.
 2. There must be a subject and predicate on each side of the conjunction.)
4. How to use a colon (to list or to add explanatory information).
5. How to identify a subject and predicate (for punctuating compound sentences).